

Friendship



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By:

Saint Francis de Sales

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Among the passions, love holds first place. It is the king of the heart's movements and it converts everything to it, rendering the one who loves similar to the one loved. [Osee 9:10]. Be very careful, therefore, Dear Reader, not to have any evil love, because you will in turn quickly become evil yourself.

Friendship is the most dangerous of all love. Why? Because other loves can exist without communication, exchange, closeness. But, friendship is completely founded upon communication and exchange and cannot exist in practice without sharing in the qualities and defects of the friend loved.

Not all love is friendship:

- First of all, because one can love without being loved. It may then be love, but not friendship. For friendship is mutual, reciprocal, and if it is not reciprocated, it is not friendship.
- Secondly, because it is not enough that it be reciprocal; it is also essential that those who love each other recognize their mutual love. If they are unaware of it, it is not friendship.
- Thirdly, because in friendship there must exist some kind of exchange or communication, for such is the foundation of friendship.

Friendship differs according to the different kinds of communication, and the communications differ according to the variety of goods exchanged. If these are false goods, then the friendship is false. Honey gathered from the best flowers is the best. So too, the better the goods exchanged, the better the friendship. It is said that the honey of Heraclea, gathered from aconite, which is very abundant in that region, renders mad those who eat it. So too, friendship founded on the exchange of false and vicious goods is itself completely false and vicious.

The exchange of carnal delights ought not to be called friendship in human relations any more than it would be called such in donkeys or horses. If marriage implied only this kind of exchange, it would no longer deserve to be called friendship. In addition to this, there must be a communication of life, of work, of feelings, and finally an indissoluble fidelity. With these dimensions, the friendship of marriage is a true and holy friendship.

Friendship founded on the exchange of sensual pleasures is gross and unworthy of the name of friendship, and so too is that based on vain and frivolous qualities, since these also depend on the senses.

I call sensual pleasures those which are attached directly and principally to the five senses—the pleasure of seeing beauty, of hearing a sweet voice, of touching pleasant things...

I term frivolous qualities those capacities, innate or acquired, which superficial people call “virtues” or “perfections.” Just listen to young people; they do not hesitate to conclude that a person has great qualities simply because he dances well, dresses well, sings well, chats pleasantly, has a fine appearance, or is skilled in all kinds of games. Do not charlatans consider the biggest clowns to be the most accomplished people in their group?

Since all this relates only to the level of the senses, we can qualify as sensual those friendships based on such. They really deserve to be called amusements rather than friendships. Such are ordinarily the friendships among young people, stopping as they often do at such things as moustaches, hair, glances, clothing, attractiveness, small talk—friendships worthy of that age whose virtue is still only downy and whose judgment is just in the bud—friendships which are but fleeting, melting like snow in the sun.

FLIRTATIONS

When these frivolous friendships are practiced between persons of different sex—without intention of marriage—we call them passing fancies or flirtations. Being only abortive births or appearances of friendship, they are unable—by reason of their futility and their imperfection—to bear either the name of friendship or that of love. However, they preoccupy hearts, which are, as it were, entangled and intertwined by vain and foolish affections founded upon frivolous communications and meager amusements that we have just mentioned.

And even though it may not be the primary intention of those who give themselves to them—because then they would no longer be flirtations but manifest impurities—these stupid loves usually end up by sinking into very ugly carnal pleasures.

Sometimes, several years go by without those who are attacked by this folly doing anything that is directly contrary to bodily chastity. They are content with taking pleasure in these desires, these wishes, these sighs, and other such nonsense, and this upon various pretenses.

What, then, are they seeking who yield to these vain pastimes? Some have no other design than to satiate their need to love and be loved. They do not truly choose their

friends and, when they encounter someone attractive, they are guided solely by their preference and their instinct without carefully examining the heart and conduct of those they find attractive. They become entangled in nets from which they have great difficulty escaping.

Some others yield to vanity and think it is no small glory to bind many hearts by love. Therefore, they act for such glory, setting their trap and spinning their web in beautiful, exalted, and extraordinary places.

Finally, others are driven simultaneously by their amorous inclination and by their vanity. Since their heart is prone to love, they intend to derive some advantage from it.

All these friendships are evil, foolish, and illusory:

- Evil, because they end up in sin of the flesh and because they steal the love—and consequently the heart—from God and from the husband, the wife, to whom it is owed;
- Foolish, because they have neither foundation nor reason;
- Illusory, because they bring neither profit nor happiness nor satisfaction.

On the contrary, they cause a waste of time and compromise honor without bringing any satisfaction other than the torment of seeking and hoping, without knowing exactly what they are seeking and hoping for! The unfortunate people who succumb to this think that there is always, “something more,” to be desired in the protestations of love from others, without, however, knowing what this “something more” is. Their desire is therefore endless and it keeps mistrust, jealousy, and unrest alive in their hearts.

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus wrote this marvelous paragraph on the subject of frivolous women. (It can be applied to men just as well.):

O woman, your beauty belongs to your husband; if it is for other men, like a net spread over a flock of birds, what will become of it? You are pleased by someone because he finds you beautiful. You will return him glance for glance. Smiles and careless little words of love follow. At the beginning, they are on the sly. Familiarities come next, and finally open flirtations. I prefer not to say what will happen next. I shall say, however, that all this is not without danger!

You have a game here in which the one who plans to capture gets captured. As soon as our hearts see a soul inflamed with love for them, they are presently inflamed with love for it. You think you can stop at any time. In this, you are greatly

mistaken. Love's fire is more ardent and more penetrating than you imagine. You think you have received only a spark and are totally astonished to discover that in an instant your whole heart is inflamed, your resolutions are reduced to cinders and your reputation is in smoke.

Who pities a snake charmer bitten by a snake that he hoped to train? [*Ecclus.* 12:13]. Senseless ones! Did you think you could charm love and manipulate it according to your taste? You only wanted to play with it, but it has bitten you cruelly. Do you know what people will do? They will mock and laugh at you because you relied on a false assurance and put inside your heart a dangerous serpent which has made you lose both your soul and your honor.

Is there any blindness greater than that which leads us to wager the best part of our soul on such frivolous pledges? Yes, Dear Reader, I say the best part, because God wants us only for our soul, and the soul only for the will, and the will only for love.

We are already all too poor in love. By that I mean that we must have a great deal of it in order to love God as He ought to be loved; and yet, totally poor as we are, we waste it on frivolities as if we had too much of it! This great God who created, preserved, and redeemed us has the right to all our love and all our gratitude, and He will demand an accounting of our foolish expenses. If we are to be judged for every useless word, how much more severely will we be judged for all these useless, improper, foolish, and pernicious friendships?

It is said that the walnut tree does immense harm to the field in which it is planted. Because of its size, it absorbs all the nutrients from the earth, leaving insufficient nourishment for other plants. Because its foliage is so dense, it gives too much shadow to the surrounding cultivation. Finally, its fruits (walnuts) attract many passersby, who thereby tread the soil all around it, ruining whatever is growing there.

These petty loves cause the same harm to the soul:

- On the one hand, they so monopolize it that it has no more strength for the good;
- On the other hand, they drag it through so many conversations, amusements, and frivolities that they leave it no time for useful activities;
- Finally, they attract so many distractions, temptations, and suspicions to it that it is completely trampled and ruined.

In brief, along with the love of God, these follies kill even the fear of displeasing Him. They agitate the mind and tarnish the reputation. In a word, they are the amusement of the world but the pestilence of hearts.

TRUE FRIENDSHIPS

Love your neighbor, Dear Reader, with a great, charitable love, but befriend only those with whom you can be mutually supportive in virtue. The higher the virtues that you put into these relationships, the more perfect will your friendship be.

If your mutual exchanges deal with knowledge, your friendship is certainly very laudable; it will be even better if they deal with the moral virtues such as prudence, discretion, strength, justice [cf. Wis. 3:7-8; Prov. 8:14]; but if they pertain to charity, the love of God, Christian perfection, then this friendship is truly precious and excellent.

- Excellent because it comes from God.
- Excellent because it tends toward God.
- Excellent because its bond is God.
- Excellent because it will endure eternally in God.

Oh, how good it is to be loved on earth the way one is loved in Heaven and to learn to cherish each other in this world, as we shall do eternally in the other!

I am not speaking of the simple love of charity that is due to all. I am speaking of spiritual friendship by which two or more only one soul. With what excellent reason they can say, "How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." [*Ps. 132(133):1*]. It seems to me that all other friendships are but phantoms in comparison with this one and their bonds are iron chains in comparison with this great bond of Divine love, which is pure gold. God, moreover, will eternally bless such friendships.

Do not form any other kind of friendship. I am speaking here only of those friendships that you form yourself, because you must neither abandon nor despise those which nature or your previous obligations require you to cultivate: relatives, allies, benefactors, neighbors.

You will perhaps be told not to have any particular friendship, because it preoccupies the heart, distracts the mind, and causes jealousy. They are mistaken who say this. Because they have read in the writings of the saints that this kind of

friendship is harmful for religious, they think that it is also harmful for people living in the midst of the world. I must, therefore, make some clarifications for you on this matter.

In a well-regulated monastery, perfection in the love of God is the common goal—that toward which all are supposed to tend. It is not necessary, therefore, to speak of it with a particular friend, lest by seeking in particular what ought to be sought in common, one pass from particulars to preferences and divisions.

But, for those who live in the midst of the world and yet strive for true virtue, it is necessary to ally themselves to one another by a holy and sacred friendship through which they stimulate, assist, and encourage each other toward good.

Those who walk on level ground do not need to hold hands, but those who climb steep and slippery roads need to hold on to each other in order to progress more securely.

Religious have no need of particular friendships, but those living in the world need them as a mutual strength and aid in the many difficult passages that have to be crossed.

Not everyone in the world aspires to the same goal and not all have the same spirit. It is therefore sometimes necessary to step aside and form friendships according to where one is heading. Assuredly, these are instances of preference, but of a holy preference that makes no division except that which is necessary; that is, between good and evil, sheep and goats, bees and hornets.

Since the Gospel says it [John 13:23], no one will deny that Our Lord manifested a particular friendship for Saint John, Lazarus, and Mary Magdalene. It is known that Saint Peter loved Saint Mark and Saint Petronilla tenderly; Saint Paul loved Timothy and Thecla; Saint Gregory of Nazianzus speaks on many occasions of his friendship with Saint Basil. “It seemed,” he said, “that we had but one soul, one ambition—that of practicing virtue and of making all our projects tend toward Heaven.” Saint Ambrose loved Saint Monica for her exceptional virtues and she cherished him as an angel of the Lord.

But I am wrong to make you waste your time on such self-evident things. Friendship is a virtue, and the greatest saints have had friends without harm to their advancement along the road of perfection. Perfection does not consist in abstaining from friendships, but in having only those that are good and holy.

FRIENDSHIPS: TRUE AND FALSE

This is an important warning, Dear Reader. Honey from Heraclea, though very poisonous, greatly resembles honey that is very healthy for us. Obviously, there is great danger in mistaking one for the other or of eating them together. The healthy one does not neutralize the poisonous one. Since Satan often tricks those who love, we must be on our guard not to make a mistake relative to friendship. This is especially true for friendships with the opposite sex.

One may begin with love altogether virtuous. But, if one is not very prudent, flirtatious love can get mixed in it, then sensual love, and finally carnal love. Yes, this danger exists even in spiritual love, even though this love is not so easily deluded because its purity brings to light, in a more evident fashion, impurities that might otherwise slip past it. For this reason, when Satan tries to corrupt this love, he does it more insidiously, almost insensibly.

Worldly friendship is distinguished from holy and virtuous friendship in the same way that poisonous honey is distinguished from good honey. It is said that poisonous honey is sweeter because of the aconite from which it comes. So too, worldly friendship shows itself in its use of sugary, passionate words, in praise for beauty, grace, and sensual qualities. Holy friendship, on the other hand, shows itself in its use of simple and frank language; it praises only virtue and the grace of God, its unique foundation.

Poisonous honey causes dizziness. False friendship causes a spiritual dizziness of the mind in which one staggers along the road of chastity and God's love. It increases by immodest looks, sensual caresses, sighs, reproaches, an affected walk, gallantries, and other familiarities. Such are sure warnings of an approaching ruin to chastity. Holy friendship, on the contrary, is simple and modest; its manifestations are pure and frank; it only sighs for Heaven and its only complaint is that God is not loved enough.

Just as poisoned honey blurs the sight, worldly friendship blurs judgment, in that those involved in it actually believe they are doing good, when they are doing something wrong. They imagine that their pretexts and explanations are truly valid. They fear the light and are content to remain in the dark. Holy friendship is just the opposite. It is clear-sighted, has nothing to hide, and is happy to be seen by others in the full light of day.

Finally, Heracleian honey, though at first sweet, leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. So too, with false friendships. They always change into indecent conversations and carnal demands. In case of rejection, they result in injuries, calumnies, deceptions,

sadness, jealousies, and can often end in violence. Chaste friendship is always honorable, courteous, and kind. It tends only toward a union of spirits, a union that is ever more pure and more perfect—the living image of the friendship which is practiced in Heaven.

The peacock spreads his feathers and struts about to excite watching peahens. It is the same when a man who has no intention of lawful marriage parades himself about, wears attractive clothing, and comes to whisper in a woman's ear. His only intention is to incite her to evil. A woman of honor will refuse to listen to the peacock's cry, the voice of this enchanter. [Ps. 57(58):5-6]. If she does listen, it augurs poorly for her heart's future.

If young persons do not wish to be surprised by their parents, spouse, or confessor when employing certain words, caresses, or glances, this testifies that these acts are contrary to honor and conscience.

REMEDIES FOR EVIL FRIENDSHIPS

You will no doubt ask me the remedy for these impure loves.

As soon as you sense the attack, however light it may be, be careful not to compromise with the enemy in any way. Do not say, "I shall listen to him but not yield to him. I shall lend him my ear but refuse my heart."

No! Quickly turn away from him, toward the Savior's Cross, and make it your rampart and your protection.

For the love of God, Dear Reader, be unyielding on this point! The heart and the ear talk to one another, and so it is as impossible to keep words of love heard in the ear from descending to the heart as it is to stop a flooding torrent. Therefore, take care to close your ears to the music of these foolish words, or your heart will be quickly contaminated by them. Listen to no proposition, under any pretext whatever; only thus will there be no need to fear being uncivil.

Remember that you have given your heart to God. Once offered to Him, it would be a sacrilege to take away a single fiber. Rather, offer it to Him anew and, like a deer in its covert, call upon God. He will come to your assistance and His love will take yours under its protection, enabling you to live solely for Him.

If you are already caught in the nets of these poor loves, it will be very difficult to extricate yourself. Place yourself in the presence of God and acknowledge your great misery, your weakness, your futility. With the greatest effort your heart is

capable of, detest these loves that you have entered into. Renounce the promises made or received and resolve with a great and absolute will no more to take part in these games and deeds of love.

I hope that you will be able to distance yourself from the object of this false love, because, once bitten by love, one will hardly be cured so long as the person who has suffered the same attack remains close. Distance is a great help for lessening the torments and the ardors of both sadness and love.

Saint Ambrose recounts how, after a long voyage, a young man returned completely cured of his past follies. He was so transformed that when he met the woman he had loved, he did not recognize her.

"What?" she asked him. "You do not know me? I am the same"

"Yes," he replied, "but I am no longer the same!"

Absence had sufficed to bring about this happy transformation. Saint Augustine admitted that to lessen his sadness at the death of a very dear friend, he left the city in which his friend had died and returned to Carthage.

What can one do who is unable to get this distance? He must absolutely cut off all one-on-one conversations, all secret meetings, all glances, and smiles—in short, all that is likely to feed this evil flame. And, if he must speak to his accomplice, let this be only to inform him, briefly and very firmly, of the eternal separation he has sworn. I say forcefully to all those who have fallen into this trap: Cut it short; have done with it; break it off! Do not untie the knots; cut them so as to render them useless. You must be unsparing when it is a question of a love that is so contrary to the love of God.

Perhaps you fear that, once the chains of this enslavement are broken, there will still linger some marks on your heart. That will not be, Dear Reader. If you hate the evil as much as it deserves, you will not experience any sentiment other than a great repulsion for these loves and for anything associated with them. As for the other person, the only affection will be that of a very pure charity for the love of God.

But, if your repentance is imperfect and some evil inclinations still linger, retire to the solitude of your soul and renounce them with all your strength. Often repeat the resolutions you have made; read holy books more assiduously; go to Confession and Communion more often; confide humbly in your spiritual director, or, lacking one, in some prudent and trustworthy person. Be assured that God will free you from your passion if you are faithful to this advice.

Perhaps you will suggest that it is ungrateful to break off a friendship so ruthlessly. If this is ingratitude, Dear Reader, what a blessed ingratitude. For it renders you so pleasing to God! But, be assured that this is in no way ingratitude because, by breaking your own bonds, you break those of your friend as well, since you hold them in common. Even though he may perhaps suffer at the moment, he will soon recognize his blessedness and give thanks to God with you.

MORE ADVICE ON FRIENDSHIPS

Friendship demands great communication between friends; this is the first condition for its birth and its continuance. It often happens that with the exchange of friendship, other exchanges slip unnoticed from one heart to another. The greater the esteem between friends, the greater is their openness of heart and the sharing of feelings or impressions, good or bad.

The bees of Hirable, which make that honey about which I have already spoken, only want to make honey. Nonetheless, while gathering, they inadvertently take in the poisonous properties of the aconite upon which they do their gathering. The ancients used to say, “Be good money changers and good minters;” i.e., do not receive false money with the good nor coarse gold with fine gold; separate what is precious from what is mediocre. [Cf. Jer.15:19]. And know that no one exists who does not have some imperfection.

Why, then, should we inadvertently receive our friend’s imperfections and defects along with his friendship? We ought to love him, certainly, in spite of his imperfection. But, since true friendship supposes the sharing of the good and not the bad, we ought neither to love nor to accept his imperfections. It is the same for those who pan for gold in the riverbed. They allow the sand to pass through, rejecting it in order to carry off only gold. Those who share a good friendship ought to reject the sand of imperfections and not permit it to penetrate their soul.

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus tells how Saint Basil’s friends loved and admired him so much that they imitated him in everything, including his exterior eccentricities. They copied his slow speech, his distracted air, and even the shape of his beard and his manner of walking! Do we not know of husbands, wives, children, and friends who love and esteem each other so much that through imitation or a giving in, they ultimately acquire the same defects?

This ought not to happen. Everyone has enough to handle with his own faults without taking on those of others as well! Not only is this not required of friendship,

but friendship actually obliges us to help each other to be freed of every imperfection. We must, therefore, patiently and gently bear with our friend's imperfections, but not encourage them, much less adopt them.

I am speaking only of imperfections, because if there is a question of sin we must neither encourage nor tolerate. It is the mark of a feeble and warped friendship to see a friend perishing without helping him or to watch him suffer from an abscess without attempting to lance it with a reprimand that would save him.

True and vibrant friendship cannot subsist in sin. Just as it is said that the salamander extinguishes the fire it lies upon, so sin ruins the friendship in which it is lodged. If it is only a passing sin, a friendly warning will dispel it. If, however, it stops there and remains, friendship will perish immediately, for it lives only on true virtue.

How much less, then, should we commit sin for the sake of friendship! The friend who urges us to sin and thus wishes our ruin becomes an enemy, no longer deserving of our friendship: one of the surest marks of the falseness of a friendship is that it is bestowed upon a vicious person. If the one we love is vicious, then our friendship can only be vicious, because, since its foundation is not true virtue, it is necessarily based on some frivolous or sensual quality.

I add that the agreements made between merchants for a temporal profit are only a caricature of friendship. They are made only through love of gain and not through love of persons.

Here then, Dear Reader, are two quotes from Holy Scripture, quotes that will help you advance with safety along the way of the Christian life.

One is from Ecclesiasticus: "He who fears God shall likewise have good friendship" [Ecclus. 6:17]

The other is from Saint James, "...know you not that the friendship of this world is the enemy of God?" [Jas. 4:4].



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